



## Introduction: Many Indias, Many Diasporas

Rita Christian, Judith Misrahi-Barak

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## INTRODUCTION

### MANY INDIAS, MANY DIASPORAS

*Rita CHRISTIAN & Judith MISRAHI-BARAK*  
*London Metropolitan University, UK / University Paul-Valéry,*  
*Montpellier 3*

This collection of essays springs from an international conference held at Paul Valéry University, Montpellier 3, in April 2009, organised by the Cerpac (Centre d'Étude et de Recherche sur les Pays du Commonwealth / Research Centre on the Commonwealth), now merged into EMMA (Études montpelliéraines du monde anglophone). It proposes a selection of the papers that were presented over the four-day conference. First and foremost, we would like to address our warmest thanks to the writers Romesh Guneseera, Lakshmi Persaud and Khal Torabully for having accepted our invitation. We would also like to thank the two keynote speakers, Professor Vijay Mishra (Murdoch University, Perth, Australia) and Professor Clem Seecharan (London Metropolitan University, UK). Between the five of them and the other participants of the conference a true interaction of the creative and the critical field was once more successfully put in practice at a Cerpac conference. Romesh

Gunasekera, Lakshmi Persaud and Khal Torabully were not satisfied with delivering readings in the evenings, they also fully took part in the workshops and plenary sessions over the four days. Even if it has been impossible to reproduce the readings in the published format of this volume, some of the atmosphere is hopefully translated into the few texts that Khal Torabully has most kindly agreed to let us include, all of them unpublished so far.

The conference originated from a long-standing collaboration between Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier 3, and London Metropolitan University. 'India and the Diasporic Indian Imagination' was made possible thanks to the support of both universities and particularly the 'Conseil Scientifique' and the 'Equipe d'Accueil 741 - Étude des Pays Anglophones' in the case of the former, and the Centre for Caribbean Studies (which was run until Septembre 2009 by Pr Jean Stubbs) in the case of the latter. Because the scope of the conference was wider than any of the other conferences organised by the Cerpac since 2002, the partnership with other universities and other research centres was much needed and most welcome. It is of great significance that such a conference, international and multiple as it is, has been put together through the work of individuals who wanted to join their creativity and share ideas. Institutional partnerships of universities belonging to three different countries, joined their efforts in order to make the conference happen. We want to thank here our partners and their universities and research centres: Professor Tithi Bhattacharya from the Department of History of Purdue University, Professor Jean-François Baillon from the research team of CLIMAS (Desi) at Bordeaux 3. The research team of RIRRA21 at Montpellier 3 and the CECAM at Montpellier I also gave their support.

Our thanks also go to the City of Montpellier for letting us use the wonderful venue of the 'Maison des Relations Internationales', as well as to the 'Région Languedoc-Roussillon'. Thanks to the partnership with the international bookshop Sauramps, it was possible

for the writers' readings to take place in the 'Auditorium du Musée Fabre' and the 'Agglomération' has to be thanked for it. Last but not least, all the participants must be thanked for the quality of their papers and the high degree of enthusiasm and friendship they displayed. This collection of articles is as 'diasporic' as the topic of the conference since all the authors belong to the Indian diaspora.

Many seminars and conferences have been held on the topic of diaspora but the conference and this volume focus first and foremost on the Indian diaspora. What are the specificities of the South Asian diaspora? What about the ties it has maintained, or cut off, with Mother India? In the other direction, has the diaspora had any impact on 'Mother India'?

Large scale migration out of India began with indentured labourers or *girmitiyas* from the 1830s when thousands of Indians left the sub-continent to work in the sugar colonies, as 'bound coolies,' not only in the British Empire but also in the French colonies. These migrants were responding to the need for labour on the plantations after the legal termination of the enslavement of Africans in 1834. Thus, many were taken not only to the Caribbean but also to places like Fiji and Mauritius.

The reasons for this large scale exodus were numerous. According to Clem Seecharan:

Chronic debt, passed on from one generation to the next, perpetuated penury and killed ambition among large sections of a potentially enterprising people. Weakened bodies were a ready haven for virulent epidemics, such as cholera and smallpox . . . Young men seeking to escape from the perennial yoke of family debts, or the macabre spectre of an early grave because of famine and disease . . . (Seecharan 2008: 3)

But it was not only men who left these harsh and difficult circumstances, a large number of women were also fleeing from a range of domestic situations: widows attempting to escape the

*suttee*, abusive and violent relationships, arranged marriages and social ostracism. Scholars have also argued that many Indians had migrated from the impoverished areas of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar long before indentureship by escaping to work on the Assam tea plantations, with others travelling by the recently built railroad as far away from their homes as Burma. Heavily circumscribed because of the limitations of caste, migration therefore allowed most of them to move and adapt to new environments.

Indians were recruited later in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to work in South Africa and of course, East Africa, on the railways and in other industries, going mainly to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The descendants of these peoples, along with those of other South Asian migrants, have also gone to Europe, North America and Australia since the Second World War. As a consequence, this vast migration now constitutes a substantial and fascinatingly diverse diaspora. Representations of their notions of 'Mother India' have been crucial to the shaping of identity among many of these diasporic peoples.

In his forthcoming book, the subject of which is India and the Indian diaspora in Guyana, titled *Mother India's Shadow Over El Dorado*, Clem Seecharan seeks to explore the notion of not only many diasporas, but also of many Indias. In his own words. 'I grew up with many Indias, a tapestry of images —part fact, part fantasy—that have helped to shape me.' (Seecharan 2004: 2). This latest work explores the perception of ancestral space, that is, the idea of Mother India and its place in the imagination of the descendants of indentured labourers. The notion of many diasporas springs from the fact that it was not only indentureship that compelled Indians to leave the homeland in search of a better life and better opportunities and, of course greater challenges, beyond its shores.

Some of the ideas that Seecharan pursues in his book are how people need to construct notions of homeland, and the variety of ways

in which they create those constructs of homeland, of India, which Salman Rushdie refers to as 'imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.' (Rushdie 1992: 10). Therefore, the conception of 'homeland' has to be viewed from the perspective of the different diasporas. In this regard, memory is of great significance, and like Seecharan, Rushdie makes the argument for many Indias: ' . . . "my" India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions.' (10)

One of the most important and relevant questions that Rushdie poses is: 'What does it mean to be an 'Indian' outside of India?' (17). The answer surely lies within the varied perception of themselves by the millions of transplanted Indians outside the mother country. For the Indian outside of India, another question springs to mind as explored by Avtah Brah: 'Where is home?' she asks, 'On the one hand, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination . . . On the other hand, "home" is also the lived experience of a locality.' (Brah 1996: 192). For those indentured labourers and their descendents, many of them set out to forget, particularly where there was no direct link to the homeland, simply because the context was too painful. Out of this situation they were able to construct their own notions of India. The idea of India, the idea of home or homeland was, and perhaps still is therefore, malleable.

Clem Seecharan goes back time and time again to what he refers to as 'collective amnesia', in his piece on 'Historical Darkness' which he examines in the foreword to Brij Lal's *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*. Here, as in his forthcoming work, he speaks compellingly of this reticence of his maternal great grandmother who never spoke of her past. But hers was not an isolated case. He says:

Male and female indentured labourers had a lot to hide about their past, much of it very painful and subversive of the yearning for a fresh start. But it was infinitely easier to forget when virtually all were probably in the same situation. Collective amnesia—the culti-

vation of forgetfulness—was therefore imperative in the quest for a new life, essentially a new persona. That was why the real India, whence came the ‘bound coolies’ remained an area of darkness, eluding scrutiny. (Seecharan, forthcoming: 19)

The India ‘remembered’ is necessarily one of myth and fantasy. It is not that one does not remember, it is simply that one chooses not to remember the past one has left behind, or, if one chooses to recall at all, the memories are all fragmented. With this fragment of memory, comes a kind of ‘cognitive dissonance’ which can accompany feelings of displacement. Thus, stories are deliberately constructed narratives of homeland. The shadow of Mother India could elevate; it could also imprison.

However, it is uncertain whether more recent migrants suffer from this sense of displacement in the same way or even to the same degree, what is clear from the themes that emerge from the variety of papers that appear in this collection are issues of amnesia, trauma, mourning and loss. Spectres of the past will continue to haunt the diasporic subject and the diasporic imagination. Perhaps that is why there is this need to construct their own narratives. But the notion of many Indias and many diasporas is clearly evident; for most, to a large degree, there is still, as Stuart Hall has argued, some kind of ‘umbilical connection to the homeland and the home culture.’ (Hall 1991: 5)

This brings us to the question of identity. Does the Indian in the diaspora feel any real sense of belonging? Salman Rushdie affirms that ‘having been borne across the world, we are translated men’ (Rushdie 1992: 17). ‘Translated’ yes, but one would argue still Indian in orientation and in essence, and this is evident through various aspects of culture such as food, dance, the cinema and music. Food, almost more than any other aspects of culture has managed to link diasporic Indians helping them to assert their identities as well as bridging the gap with other communities. In *The Literature of an*

*Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imagination*, Vijay Mishra confirms that

it is food that helped create both a relatively homogenous indenture culture and a point of contact between Indians and Afro-Caribbeans. Indeed, the very production of a larger pan-Indian plantation diaspora is linked to cuisine. (91)

The popular appeal of Bollywood and the spread of Indian music, whether pure or syncretised, also demonstrate how diasporic Indians are continuing to assert their identities and are proof positive of this notion of many Indias and many diasporas.

Culture as we know is not fixed or static, it adapts as it becomes open to other influences, other cultures and experiences. It is therefore important for those in the diaspora to continue to construct narratives and recall in whatever way that allows them to remember and make links with the past however fragmented or 'hallucinatory.'

Stuart Hall sums up the idea of memory and its links with the past having a bearing on identity most accurately when he says:

Silencing as well as remembering, identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they come from. (Hall 1991: 3)

The idea of India has now gone beyond India itself because of the many diasporas which now represent South Asian people. There are, for example, Muslim people who identify with Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, or even Sri Lankans. Thus this concept of a South Asian diaspora must of necessity accommodate all these new sovereign identities. There is therefore a constant fluidity of this notion of homeland and identity. The notion of many Indias itself is now inadequate to accommodate the many diasporas as well as



these new identities, which was once to be found in the generalized notion of British India. The diversity of the themes contained within this volume is a testament to that.

It is symptomatic to see the geographic diversity of the authors of the articles that compose this volume. But even though the participants' geographic origins are multiple, this volume brings them together around the topic of the diaspora, the singular of which hardly hides its multiplicity. The organisation of the articles does not follow that of the conference, but the stage still had to be set by Clem Seecharan and Vijay Mishra who had given the two keynote speeches. This introductory part, **Setting the Diasporic Stage**, is meant to allow the reader to grasp some of the key historical and conceptual aspects of the South Asian diaspora, and some of its challenges. Clem Seecharan in 'India's Awakening and the Imagining of the 'East Indian Nation' in British Guiana' chronicles the construction of Indianness, paradoxically delineating itself through the intricate formation of its diaspora in British Guiana and that of the 'East Indian nation'. 'Coolies' were going to move from guilt and scorn to rehabilitation and pride through the perception of a motherland which they would constantly reinvent. The construct of India as a nation, remembered-imagined from the diaspora, contributed to the construction of the 'East Indian nation'.

Mishra's argument in "'In the Arcade of Hanuman House": Ghostly Spectres in the Diaspora' that India exists only as a discursive representation and a spectre that haunts the worlds of those who live in the diaspora, will be at the heart of many of the following articles. Borrowing the phrase 'in the arcade of Hanuman House' from V. S. Naipaul's classic novel of the Indian diaspora, *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mishra returns to his construction of the diasporic imaginary, finding his focus in plantation diaspora and in the way a ghostly India, both imaginary and mnemonic, was created in incompleteness, away from any physical presence. Memory, food and the

filmic image are the three spectres that are invoked by Mishra so as to see the kinds of narratives that are constructed in the diaspora. As can be seen in Vijay Mishra's text, songs have been reproduced, but no printed matter can give an idea of the emotion that arose in the auditorium when Vijay actually sang the songs! The personal autobiographical remarks give a very specific personal touch to Mishra's article. It is also the personal autobiographic backdrop which gives Laurel Steele's article, 'Writing Class with Mr Khan: No Luncheon at Longchamps for the Jumbie Bird', its originality of tone. Steele uses her memories of being in a creative writing class taught by Ismith Khan in 1971 to raise questions which will accompany the reader throughout the collection, talking about the diaspora before the term was even used, or even existed. *The Jumbie Bird*, published in 1961, was indeed diasporic literature before anyone was concerned about diasporic literature. The story 'Luncheon at Longchamps', rejected by *The New Yorker*, raised questions about Khan which would surface later and which Steele herself would understand eventually.

Loss and mourning are at the heart of Mishra's conception of diaspora. The ghosts of the former life never stop returning and the question that constantly arises is how to dispel them, and whether they can be dispelled at all. It is what gives its title to the second stage of the collection, **Loss, Mourning and Trauma**. The geographical migration sustained by the hope of a better life is necessarily traumatic because it is shackled by the loss of home and familiar bearings, geared as it is to turn into *trauma histories*. Sophie Croisy in 'Unveiling Everyday Traumas: Migrations in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*' examines how Mootoo brings forth the characteristics, causes and consequences of cultural trauma occurring through deterritorialization to a place where acculturation and oppression are part and parcel of the colonial system. Uprootedness and disconnection wreak havoc in characters like Chandin Ramchandin, the

indentured worker of Indian origin who migrated to Trinidad and around whom the different diegetic levels of the novel are organised. The question is whether the physical and psychological fragmentation, and the cultural loss he went through necessarily have to be visited on his descendants.

What one inherits or seeks to become is also what Catherine Pessoa-Miquel interrogates in 'Unseen Cities: Representations of the Diasporic Experience in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*'. Exile, loneliness and even terror are so overpowering in the novel that co-existence with the white world cannot develop into anything but mutual invisibility. The immigrant community cannot be depicted through any other mode but tragic realism. Yet, it is the poetic strategy of the novel to try and reappropriate the English world through the description of a few niches of natural and exquisite beauty. Diasporic living is not only about erasure and deliberate blindness but also about the complexity of all the unseen spaces of inner and outer life. It is also reappropriation which Maria-Sabina Draga-Alexandru is interested in in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, Vikram Chandra's collection of framed stories. In 'Provincialising London in Vikram Chandra's Novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*' she examines how Chandra revises his rights to history but also to the novelistic form and ultimately to the English space and the English language. Within the embedded stories, it is the whole approach to textuality which becomes nomadic.

If one can agree that descriptive imagery may be seen as forming the core of Kiran Desai's novel, Kerstin Shands, in 'Hyperfabula of Gains and Losses: Immanent and Transcendent Narrative Perspectives in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*', chooses to analyse the novel from an angle that is different from the one taken by critics so far. Far from being only a bitter exploration of chaos and despair, Shands puts the emphasis on the multidimensionality of narrative and on the intricate ways balance is ultimately reached, at many lev-

els, using the concepts of immanence and transcendence. The immanence of home and roots vs the transcendence of the diasporic mind may not be as clear-cut as one may believe at first. What seems to be opposed at first may simply be poles of a multiple and ungraspable reality which Shands calls *immanent-transcendent*.

Diaspora felt and experienced as burden and guilt accounts for the recurrent question of return. The third part of the collection, **To Go Home, or Not to Go Home**, is geared to approach its different layers. Chun Fu in 'The (Im-)Possibility of Backtracking in M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*' delves into the intricacies of diasporic dual temporalities and into in-betweenness as a versatile terrain to explore. In the web formed by India, Tanzania and Canada, what kind of backtracking is possible and what kind of backlash does it wreak on the present? The remembered past appears as a touchstone for the present. Reminding us of Nadeem Aslam's urban spaces, Sabine Lauret raises the question of the definition of 'home' in 'The Going Home Syndrome in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*'. How are the past realities of 'home' in a Bangladeshi village transformed by the prism of the diasporic world of Tower Hamlets, and vice versa? Ali's characters and more generally diasporic characters, appear to be *lost in migration*, as Lauret puts it. The paradoxes of the 'going home syndrome' seem to be widely shared in the diaspora. The ambivalences of affiliation are also underlined by Pascal Zinck in 'The Return of the Natives: Infernal Paradise in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Romesh Gunsekera's *Heaven's Edge*'. In both novels protagonists return to their native countries only to feel even more alienated. Reconciliation, regeneration and tentative reconnection are necessary stages in the tribulations of the returnees if they want to achieve agency and meaning.

Edward Soja's *Thirdspace*, developed from the theories of Henri Lefebvre and taken up by Louise Harrington in 'An-Other Space: Diasporic Responses to Partition in Bengal', could be said to be

presiding over the fourth part of the collection, **From Diasporic Dis-Locations and Re-Locations to Diaspora as Thirdspace**. Focusing on the context of Partition in Bengal, Harrington founds her interpretation of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, and Tareque Masud's film *The Clay Bird*, on the concept of diaspora as a site of challenge and affirmation. By borrowing a phrase that Soja himself borrowed from bell hooks, *a space of radical openness*, and finding support for her argument in the theories of Homi Bhabha, T. Minh-ha Trinh and bell hooks, Harrington helps us launch a new phase in the dynamics of the volume, that of the diasporic space as one of translation and transgression, one of creativity, empowerment and agency. Selwyn Cudjoe in 'Modes of Indian Literature in the Diaspora: Trinidad and Tobago' precisely shows how the narrative and theatrical texts that Indian indentured workers brought with them to the Caribbean not only reflected their nationalist attachment to the Indian nation but also contributed to their resilient attitude in a society which would rather have kept them in subaltern positions. Adaptation and survival are keys to understanding the Indo-Caribbean people.

Adaptation and survival skills provide Indo-Caribbean women with the resilience necessary to adjust to their new environment, be it the Caribbean after the 19<sup>th</sup> century migration, or countries like Canada in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simone Alexander in '"Two Bo-rat Can't Live in the Same Hole": Revis(ion)ing Indo-Caribbean Female subjectivity in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*', and Myriam Moise in 'Diasporic Women in Lakshmi Persaud's Novels' bring the light on Ramabai Espinet and Lakshmi Persaud respectively, who turn their attention to Indo-Caribbean women until recently too often dismissed into silence. From neglect and secrecy, entrapment and oblivion, Indo-Caribbean women are moved by Espinet and Persaud, and by Alexander and Moise, into resistance and reappropriation of themselves, far from the truncated lives that had been imposed to them by patriarchy and colonial society.

Another movement is initiated in the volume by articles dealing with other forms of narratives and other media. The fifth part, entitled **The Visual and the Oral, the Playful and the Virtual**, brings together articles about sport games, films, music and cybertexts. Alexis Tadié, in 'Is Cricket a Fictional Sport?' focuses on this most English and most diasporic sport that cricket is, and on the ways the game has been reconfigured through fiction in English. From the narratives of Charles Dickens to P.G Wodehouse celebrating the Englishness of cricket, Tadié moves to C.L.R. James, Joseph O'Neil or Romesh Gunsekera's readings of cricket as historical and political, diasporic and multicultural. The sense of communal belonging and that of an individual mnemonic identity, both experienced through the physical endeavours of the body as it exists in the present of here and now, is also what presides over music and film. Florence Cabaret in 'Variations on Diasporic Viewpoints in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (2004) and Mira Nair's Filmic Adaptation of the Novel (2007)' analyses the deep meaning of the variations that occur between the novel and its filmic adaptation, particularly the privileging of one generation over another and the dates chosen for the action to be set in. Cabaret shows how the fact that it is not the same India that is being projected in both cases has deep underlying political connotations. Food as commodity, metaphor and rhetoric is central to the perception of India in its diaspora; it is focused on by Binita Mehta in '*Bhaji, Curry, and Masala: Food and/as Identity in Four Films of the Indian Diaspora*'. A uniting yet transnational link between the migrant and the home country as well as between the members of the Indian diasporic community, *masala* may however not hold the same trappings for self-identification in the films by Mira Nair, Srinivas Krishna, Vijay Singh or Gurinder Chadha. Zeenat Saleh in '*Mississippi Masala: a Case Study in Forced Hybridity*' reminds us of the poetics and politics of Thirdspace broached earlier on and emphasizes cinema as another perfect medium to question the dialectics of diasporic space.

If hybridity was already essential to the arguments developed about films, Claude Chastagner examines the coming together of bhangra and American popular music, hip-hop and rap. In 'When Bhangra Meets Hip-Hop: Articulating Hybridity on American Soil' he contends that there is a specificity in the diasporic regeneration that is contained in musical forms which borrow, adapt and incorporate multiple musical forms, foregrounding the sharing of common references. Both cinema and music seem to have become diasporic media par excellence, through which the Indian diaspora shapes the representation of itself, but the internet, transnational and boundaryless as it is, is another tool of this diasporic identity. Pia Mukherji in 'Desigirls@blogspot.com: Gender, Diaspora and Cybertexts' wonders whether cyber practices actually facilitate new forms of feminism or simply participate in the globalized reshaping of identities. Cyber politics may have already altered the politics of diasporic gender identity.

Only a short step is needed to join the Indian diaspora of migrants who went to francophone colonies of the Caribbean or of the Indian ocean as indentured workers. The last part of the volume, **Diaspora and Coolitude**, deals with francophone texts and contexts. Valérie Magdelaine opens the last part of the volume with 'Écriture ethnographique et imagination diasporique dans les romans de l'engagement indien (La Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique)'. After a long silence, the descendants of the indentured workers let themselves plunge into their repressed desire to be part of history and recompose the 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai) they felt were theirs. How can the migrant hold acculturation at bay? The francophone context takes its difference from the political situation that, because of 'départementalisation', is different from the anglophone context. It has probably been much more difficult to fight against the politics of assimilation and cultural annihilation. Through texts written recently by writers from Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion,

Magdelaine is looking at the modalities of a diasporic reconstruction through genealogic and textual imagination. Once the context is set, it is easier to focus on the strategies of reappropriation of exoticism as they are foregrounded by Mar Garcia in 'La colonie pénitentiaire: exotisme et altérité dans *Soupir* d'Ananda Devi'. In the context of the general anomia of Devi's novel, the absence of past goes hand in hand with the dispossession of self, and the absence of avowed filiation makes affiliation impossible.

The original trauma of indentureship is subsumed and translated into the poetics of what Khal Torabully calls *coolitude*. Véronique Bragard in '« Divali ne fut jamais plus beau de tant d'océans franchis »: coolitude et métissages dans la poésie de Khal Torabully' revisits Torabully's theoretical concept of *coolitude* and examines how his poetry makes it meaningful and dynamic, crossing all the oceans of our diasporic selves. Bragard's article is an apt conclusion to the volume, moving away from monolithic definitions of diaspora and towards a multiple poetic *métissage*, celebrating the dialogic plurality of India and its diasporas. Diaspora has been associated with geographic dispersal, with loss and separation, with 'the loss of a season' as Nadeem Aslam put it, with that 'impossible mourning' Vijay Mishra speaks about. Yet resilience and agency have also been woven into colonial disempowerment, geographic separation and cultural loss. Identity has been translated and re-jointed, revealed in all its diversity and richness.